Positive strokes

BRAD SHIRAKAWA/Chief Photographer

Visiting Aptos artist Carmen Leon, assists San Juan Bautista second-grader Taylor Finell.

Visiting artist paints dreams

■ Carmen Leon can teach art, but her goal is to inspire young minds to reach out

By JULIE FINIGAN
Staff Writer

Colorful rainbows, stars and grass brightened Barbara Schafer's second grade classroom at San Juan School Friday when bursts of creativity were encouraged by visiting artist Carmen Leon.

"These are rainbows, this is the sun and these are stars," explained 8-year-old Dulce Kachman. "Eight and a half," she insisted as she watched a reporter copy her age down.

Such observations are the gems children have to offer, according to Leon, a professional painter from Aptos.

"They don't need to be taught art, they're already artists," Leon said.

"They just need to be encouraged and to continue. With all the influences of TV in their lives, they begin to be limited, to close down and lose faith in themselves.

"Art is a vehicle to express themselves in other areas too. It makes them feel good and promotes self-esteem," Leon said.

Leon, who was born in San Francisco, moved to Paris to study art after graduating from high school. While there, she studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts under a master teacher.

"It was always a dream of mine," Leon said.

"It is such a wonderful experience to be in Europe and to be exposed to different arts. I fulfilled a dream by going there, and that's what these children have to do, fulfill their dreams."

Leon was at San Juan School as part of the Arts in the Schools program, sponsored and partially funded by the San Benito County Arts Commission.

"We also receive funding

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BRAD SHIRAKAWA/Chief Photographer

Carmen Leon used examples by masters such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Vassily Kandinsky.

Arts

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from the school and the San Juan Home School Club," said Nancy Johnson, a fourth-grade teacher at San Juan School.

"Our Home School Club has been really great. Without their fund raisers we wouldn't have as many projects."

Artists come to the schools through the Arts in the Schools program, which distributes a book of artists for schools to choose from. Dancers, painters and sculptors are all included in the book.

"It's a good program because we learn from these artists as well, and we can pass what we learn on to our students," Johnson said. Fees are about $25 an hour, including materials.

Johnson recently learned how to bind books and paint marble designs on them, which she plans to teach her fourth-graders later this year.

Leon said her dream to become an artist arose when she was a child. In her years as an artist she has developed an appreciation for her own roots and gender.

"I am a Latina and I want to be a role model for children. It's important for them to see that women can be artists too and to have a balanced and creative life. That's a challenge, to work and have a family at the same time," Leon said.

Inspired by great women artists such as Georgia O'Keefe and Frida Kahlo, Leon said that when she was growing up, it was always men as role models.

"I am a feminist and a Latina, but a priority for me is to be an artist and to never forget about my family."

Leon has two children, a daughter who is a writer and a son who is an artist.

"It's important to encourage them and whatever dreams they have. That's what all parents can do for their children," Leon said.

Encouraging creativity was the most important part of Leon's lesson on Friday.

"You get lots of ideas and it's fun," said Tahlia Lopez, 7 (and a half), of the art lesson.